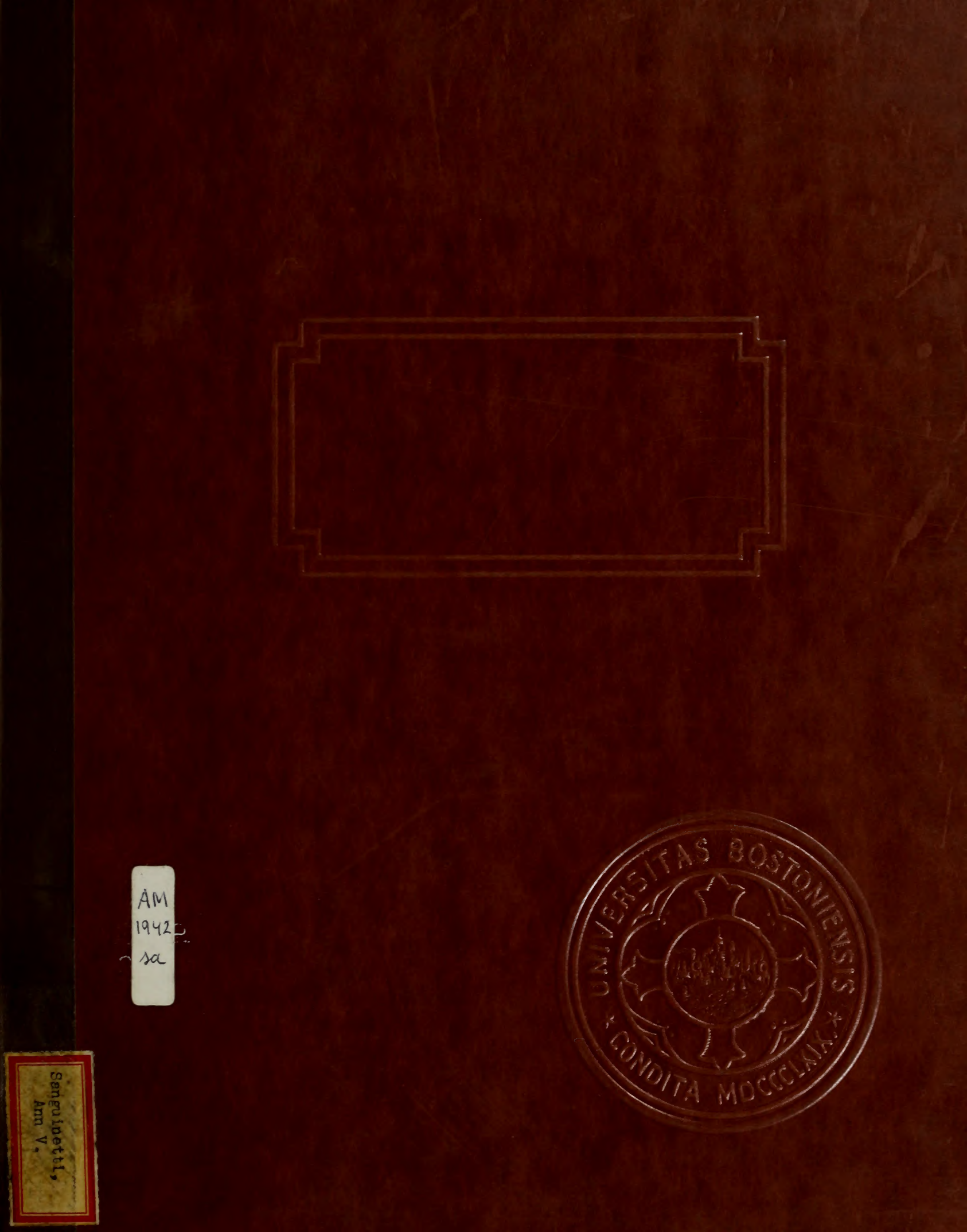

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UNIVERSITAS BOSTONIENSIS
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BOSTON UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE SCHOOL

Thesis

THE WINCHESTER CHRONICLE

by

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(A.B., Boston University 1941)

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INTRODUCTION

In studying the literature of a given age, an understanding of the historical and social forces which make up the age itself is necessary for a fuller and more complete appreciation of the literature. It was with this in mind that I approached a study of the Winchester Chronicle. In the study of any age, such a document as the Winchester Chronicle would be of great significance. In the study of an age as obscure as the Anglo-Saxon era in English literature, the Chronicle is invaluable as a means of learning, in the words of the Anglo-Saxons themselves, the events which formed the backdrop against which their literature was written. Also, to a lesser degree, the document is valuable for the light it throws on the Anglo-Saxons themselves, their character and their way of life. That the Chronicle has been sadly neglected, however, is obvious from the amazingly small number of books that have been written on the subject.

In this thesis, I have attempted an appreciation of the Chronicle as an historical and social document and an evaluation of it in its importance in English literature.

In preparing my thesis, I used source books for my first chapter, in which I discuss the Winchester Chronicle, its origin, history, and its relationship to the other Anglo-Saxon Chronicles. In my second chapter I discuss the Chronicle as history; in the third chapter I discuss the Chronicle as a social document. For these two chapters my main source was the text of the Chronicle itself in the original Anglo-Saxon.

CHAPTER ONE

The Winchester Chronicle, Its Origin and Its Relationship To The Other Anglo-Saxon Chronicles.

The Winchester Chronicle is but one of seven major recensions which, when considered as a whole, are designated by the title of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. These recensions, which are usually individually designated by the name of the place of their compilation, are the Winchester or Parker Chronicle, the Canterbury Chronicle, the Abingdon Chronicle, the Worcester Chronicle, the Peterborough or Laud Chronicle, a bilingual Chronicle of Canterbury, and a Canterbury Edition of the Winchester Chronicle. They differ not so much in the main narrative, but in the details which creep in concerning local affairs and the amount of stress placed on them. They all apparently had their beginning in some early Chronicle which is now lost. Of these seven extant manuscripts, the Winchester Chronicle deserves special attention and consideration since "it has every title to rank first in the list of Saxon Chronicles".[1]

The Winchester Chronicle is a small folio on vellum containing the annals of England from the invasion of Julius Caesar to 1070 A.D. Its composition was connected principally with the town of Winchester, but in the middle of the eleventh century it was, for a reason not now known, transferred to Canterbury. Here in Norman times, it was gradually forgotten along with all other

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1. Earle, John: Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel; London, Macmillan & Co. 1899. Preface Page xxii.

Anglo-Saxon literature.

At the time of the Reformation the manuscript of the Winchester Chronicle belonged to the monastery of Christ Church, Canterbury. It was saved from continued oblivion and possible ultimate destruction by Matthew Parker, Archbishop of Canterbury. Archbishop Parker was greatly interested in old Anglo-Saxon writings and spent much time in uncovering old Saxon manuscripts, among which was the manuscript of the Winchester Chronicle.. He had been Bible Clerk, Fellow, and Master of Benet College, now Corpus Christi College, Cambridge,[1] and he made three separate gifts of his manuscripts to that college, among them the Chronicle, which has remained at the college to the present day.

The exact date of the composition of the Winchester Chronicle is unknown, although it is usually assigned to Alfred's reign. The Chronicle falls into two distinct parts. The entries up to 891 are all in the same handwriting; after 891 a number of hands took part in its composition. The conclusion usually made is that the Chronicle in its present form was begun in the reign of Alfred, possibly at the direct instigation of the King himself. The first half up to the year 891 consisted in copying and bringing up to date an earlier fragmentary Chronicle, now lost, with emendations and additions from legendary material and from Latin writings, noticeably Bede's Ecclesiastical History of England. After 891, the entries are of contemporary events; hence the different contributors and varying skill of the writers.

1. Earle, John: Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel. London, MacMillan and Co. 1865 Preface, Page xvii

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There have been a few who have doubted both that the Chronicle was composed in Alfred's time, and that it was composed in the Wessaxon dialect. In view of the use of such rare forms as "a" for "ea" as in Walas; the diphthong "ie" in hiera and Miercna; the form cuom for com; slog for sloh and so on, some have argued for a Mercian origin of the manuscript, which if proved would destroy all previously accepted theories concerning the origin of the Winchester Chronicle.

However, these forms can be used in arguing the opposite side of the question and much more effectively. At the time of Alfred, when the various Anglo-Saxon dialects were not as clearly defined as they were a hundred years later, or even fifty years later, these archaic forms were not limited to the Mercian dialect alone. Possibly they existed in all the dialects; that they, existed in Wessaxon at the time of Alfred can be very definitely proved. They occur over and over again in Alfred's own translations. Thus this only argument for Mercian origin is easily undermined. Strength is also given to the hypothesis that the Chronicle in its present form was compiled in Alfred's reign. Although these archaisms appear in the prose of Alfred's day, in later Wessaxon prose they have practically disappeared. This more or less belies the possibility that the Chronicle could have been compiled much later than Alfred's reign.

As to the question of whether Alfred played any direct part in the compilation of this Chronicle, there is at least no reason why such should not have been the case. It is reasonable to assume that a man such as Alfred who was intensely concerned

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As to the question of whether Alfred played any direct part in the compilation of this Chronicle, there is at least no reason why such should not have been the case. It is reasonable to assume that a man such as Alfred who was intensely concerned

about the welfare of his country both materially and spiritually should cause such a task to be undertaken.

To add further argument to the possibility that this Chronicle could and probably did exist in the days of King Alfred, we have a statement in the twelfth century French Chronicle of Geffrei Gaimar.

> IL (Alfred) fist escrivere in livre Engleis,
> Des aventures, e des leis,
> E des batailles de la terre,
> E des reis ki firent la guere;
> Et maint livere fist il escrivere
> U li bon clere vont sovent lire.[1]

Furthermore, in the annals following 891 especially those concerned with Alfred himself, there is warmth, vigor, freshness, and completeness that have all the earmarks of contemporary authorship.

These and other textual arguments, which will be discussed in the following chapter, have led the majority of scholars to accept the dates of Alfred's reign (871-901), as the dates for the original compilation of this Chronicle.

Thus there is great significance attached to this Chronicle. In time it is the earliest of the group of texts, and it was probably intimately connected with Alfred, the Greatest of Anglo-Saxon Kings. In this way it is more or less of a father to the rest of the Chronicles, most of which date in their present form

1. Quoted in Thorpe, The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: London, Longman, Green, Longman & Roberts; 1861. Preface, Page ix

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from the eleventh and twelfth centuries. One or two of these manuscripts, as in the case of the Canterbury Chronicle and the Peterborough Chronicle down to the year 892 are direct copies of the Winchester Chronicle. The other Chronicles are related more indirectly to the Winchester Chronicle, such as the Abingdon Chronicle which is based on the Canterbury and Worcester Chronicles, which in turn are based either upon the Winchester Chronicle itself or a lost copy of it.

In view of this fact - that the Winchester Chronicle represents the earliest historical writing in the English vernacular, and since it is more or less the foundation upon which not only the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, but indirectly many of the Latin Chronicles of both the late Anglo-Saxon and the middle English periods are built, the Winchester Chronicle is worthy of closer inspection. It is to a consideration of the Chronicle in itself that I now turn.

CHAPTER TWO

The Winchester Chronicle as An Historical Document

As an historical document the Winchester Chronicle is unique. In no other language do we find an attempt at history in the vernacular at such an early date as this Chronicle represents. In no other language have vernacular histories survived in such a complete state as has the Winchester Chronicle. It antedates all other English Chronicles by at least a century, and it has no continental counterpart for at least two centuries.

As an historical document throwing light on the Anglo-Saxon period, the Chronicle is of inestimable value. From the time that Bede wrote his Ecclesiastical History of England (c.731) to the time of the Latin Chronicle writers of the Middle English period, practically all that we know of the Anglo-Saxons stems directly or indirectly from this Chronicle.

Furthermore, when we stop and consider that what little actual data about the Anglo-Saxons contained in the Latin Chronicles is in turn derived from the vernacular Chronicles, a knowledge if not of all the Chronicles at least of the Winchester Chronicle is seen to be important to a student of Anglo-Saxon period.

The Winchester Chronicle represents the simplest form of history. As a chronicle it entailed the simple noting and narration of events with little attempt to interpret them or assign them to their proper place in a picture of a given age. The method of writing the Chronicle was simple. The event in question was merely entered beside its proper date. If there

was nothing worth noting in a given year, nothing would be recorded - the space was left blank (apparently when the manuscript was begun, a numerical list of years was prepared with a blank space beside each year for the entry. There the compiler or Chronicler would fill in the blanks for which there was material. This explains the use of the word "her" as the opening word of each entry. Her is an adverb not of time, but of place; it means not at this time or this year, but literally here, at this point of the series).

The men who wrote the Chronicle were not historians in any sense of the word, although as writers some of them were men of great skill, as can be judged from the artistic height which some of the prose passages attain. Important events, those which contributed greatly to the development of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom are sometimes either not mentioned at all or are entered so casually and often so buried under a mass of irrelevant material that in reading the Chronicle one is apt to miss them entirely. On the other hand, an incident that is relatively unimportant is enlarged upon to a magnitude quite out of keeping with its inherent significance, as in the case of the account of the battle between Cynewulf and Cyneheard, entered in the year 755.

The manuscript, as it now stands, covers the years from the year 1 to the year 1070. Up to the year 755 the entries are for the most part short, rarely longer than two or three sentences. The events are recorded without much detail or comment. Therefore, in the earlier part of the Chronicle particularly, we will find long series of short and terse entries, such as those that follow:

588 Her Aelle cyning forpferde
and Aepelric ricsode aefter him
v gear.
590 Her Ceol ricsode v gear.
591 Her micel waelfill waes aet
Woddesbeorge and Ceawlin waes ut
a drifen.
593 Her Ceawlin and Cuichelm and
Crida forwurdon and Aebelfrip feng
to rice. 1

The entries are often scattered, intervals of many years often occuring between them.

From 755 to approximately the year 925 the entries in the Chronicle are comparatively frequent and full with much attention given to detail. This is understandable since these years cover approximately the years in which the Wessaxon kingdom was at its height. From then on to the end of the Chronicle the entries are again sporadic and imcomplete, although much space in this part of the Chronicle is taken up by four poems which are inserted into it.

The manuscript, as it now exists, is in more or less the same form that it was left in by the original writers. Some interpolations were made in the entries upto the year 891. These entries were made on erasures of the original text by a twelfth century writer whose handwriting is clearly distinguishable from that of the original. In the text I used,[2] these interpolations were kindly put in italicized print by the editor to facilitate distinguishing the original matter from the interpolations.

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1. Earle, John: Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel. London, MacMillan & Co. 1865

2. Ibid

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Much of the material in the earlier part of the Chronicle, which cannot be traced definitely from written sources such as Bede, comes from the mass of unwritten traditional material handed down from generation to generation by word of mouth in what we today call the "oral tradition". This, however, does not necessarily condemn the reliability of such material. We of the modern era who, since the days of the Renaissance, have come to depend almost without exception upon the printed page as the source of historical data cannot fully appreciate the reliability which is possessed by much of this oral tradition of a people who were accustomed to carry what little knowledge they had of the past in their heads.

Around what may be called the factual basis of this oral tradition, romantic legends inevitably grew, but for the most part the writer who was responsible for the compilation of the first half of the Chronicle wisely confined himself to the entries of fact as well as he could and avoided romancing about them as much as possible.

The history of the Anglo-Saxons, as seen through this Chronicle is "that of almost unrelieved gloom. Records of harrying with fire and sword occur on almost every page, and whether the English ealdormen or the Danes 'possess the place of slaughter' the wild lawlessness and the contempt for human life.... are plainly visible."[1] Indeed the whole history of the Anglo-Saxons seems

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[1] Thomas, P. G. in the Cambridge History of English Literature, N.Y. MacMillan & Co. 1933 Vol. I P. 124

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to have been one continuous struggle, broken only by sporadic and extremely short intervals of peace. It is a wonder that anything literary was written and that anything survived.

The Winchester Chronicle begins with a genealogy of the Wassaxon kings, beginning with Cerdic, the founder of the kingdom of the West Saxons in 494 A.D. and brought up to Alfred's reign- a point, incidentally, in favor of Alfred's reign being taken as the date of this chronicle.

The first entry in the main part of the chronicle is made under the year 1 and makes a brief statement of Christ's birth as well as giving the name of the emperor of Rome at that time. From here to the year 449 is the least interesting part of the chronicle. The entries deal largely with empire and church history - the names of Popes and emperors being recorded regularly, with but meagre references to the island of the Britons.

None of the material here is what might be called first hand information. It is mainly a restatement of material derived principally from the Bible and from Bede's Ecclesiastical History. Indeed, some entries are almost direct translations from Bede. In chapter four of Bede we find the following: "In their time, whilst Eleutherius, a holy man, presided over the Roman church, Lucius, king of the Britons, sent a letter to him, entreating that by his command he might be made a Christian. He soon obtained his pious request, and the Britons preserved the faith, which they had received, uncorrupted and entire....

until the time of Diocletian"[1] In the chronicle under the year 167 is found the following:

"Her Eleutherius on Rome on feng biscdom. and pone wuldorfaestlice xii winter geheold. To pam Lucius Bretene kyning send stafas. baed paet he waere Cristen gedon. and he purh teah paet he baed. And hi syppon wunadon on rihton oppe Diaclecianes rice"[2]

Again further in Bede we find the following: "Rome was taken by the Goths.....then the Romans ceased to rule in Britain almost 470 years after Gaius Julius Caesar entered the island".[3] In the chronicle it is entered thus:

"409. Her Gotan abraecon Romeburg. and naefre sipan Romane ne ricsodon on Bretone....Ealles hi ricsodon on Bretone feower hund wintra and hund seouanti wintra sipan aerest Gaius. Julius paet lond gesohte."[4]

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1. Bede, Ecclesiastical History of England, J. A. Giles, ed. London, Bell and Doldy 1870 p. 10

2. Earle, John, Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel, London, MacMillan & Company 1865 p. 8

3. Bede, Ecclesiastical History of England, Giles, J. A. ed., London, Bell and Doldy, 1870 p. 18

4. Earle, John, Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel, London, MacMillan & Company 1865 p.10

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4. Earle, John, Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel, London, MacMillan & Company 1865 p.10

The prose in this section is simple, clear, and uninspired. It was obviously completely written when the material was compiled in its present form sometimes towards the end of the ninth century.

The annals from 449 to about the middle of the seventh century comprise the most difficult part of the chronicle to read and evaluate. These represent the years in which the new Anglo-Saxon tribes were busy conquering the islands. From the period were left practically no written records. Some of the material was derived from Bede, but the main part was pieced together out of the oral tradition and as such must be treated with circumspection.

This is the only part of the chronicle where the writers did any amount of romancing to compensate for a lack of material. There is undoubtedly much here that is historical, but mainly in generalities; specific details, names and dates cannot be trusted. Evidence of this can be seen in the highly artifical chronology of dates that occur in places. At one point there is the following series: 530, 534, 538, 540, 544, 552, 556, 560. Just how unreliable are the proper names is pointed out by my editor in a discussion of the man, Port, who, according to the chronicle, landed in England in the year 501 at a place named Portsmouth, named after himself, of course. Whoever was responsible for that part of the chronicle didn't know that the first syllable of Portsmouth was derived from the Latin word -portus- meaning harbor.[1]

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1. Earle, John, Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel, London, MacMillan & Company, 1865, preface p. lx.

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1. Earle, John, Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel, London, Macmillan & Company, 1865, preface p. ix.

The confusion is added to by the innumerable and endless genealogies that are scattered through this section of the chronicle. These genealogies can't be taken seriously and merely serve to clutter and further obscure the narrative.

The first entry in this section is the year 449 which records the first landing of the Anglo-Saxons in England. At such an important event one would expect possibly a long and detailed entry, but as is often the case, the entry is short and brief and goes as follows:

> "449. Her Mauricius and Ualentines onfengon rice and ricsodon vii wint. And on hiera dagum Hengest and Horsa from Wyrt georne geleapade Bretta kyninge geschton Bretene on pan stape pe is genemned Ypwines fleot. aerest Brettum to fultume. ac hie eft on hie fuhton."[1]

The entry has been enlarged at length by the twelfth century interpolator, but his additions are unimportant in the present consideration.

This account of the first landings of the Anglo-Saxons plus the date was undoubtedly taken from Bede.[2] There is no need for taking the account too seriously, however, although it does intrigue the imagination to consider the picture it presents--

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1. Earle, John, Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel, London, MacMillan & Company, 1865, p. 11
2. Bede, Ecclesiastical History of England, Giles, J. A. ed, London, Bell and Boldy, 1870, p. 23

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that of the Anglo-Saxons being invited in by the Britons to help fight their enemies, only to have the Anglo-Saxons turn on them. The actual invasions probably came by a long series of predatory inroads, as in the case of the Germanic migrations on the continent itself, and not in the sudden and dramatic manner related both in Bede and in the chronicle.

As to the existance of the far-famed Hengest and Horsa, that is also doubtful, but as far as the history of this period is concerned, is also unimportant. As to the date 449, there is no reason to quibble with that. In tribe migrations such as those of the Angles and Saxons into England, it is impossible to fix an exact date, but an arbitrary date such as 449 is acceptable for the sake of convenience.

From this point on the chronicle develops into an account of battle after battle for about one hundred and fifty years between the Celtic inhabitants and the invading Anglo-Saxons. Exact names and dates there may not be, but from laconic entries such as these:

> "508. Her Cerdic and Cynric ofslogen aenne Brettisc cyning. pamwas nama natanleod. and v pusenda wera mid him"
>
> "530. Her Cerdic and Cynric genamon wihte ealond and ofslogon feala men on withgaraes byrg."[1]

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1. Earle, John, Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel, London, MacMillan & Company, 1865, p. 14

one can easily imagine the state of almost contimual warfare that the island was plunged into, from which it never completely emerged for almost eight hundred years.

For hardly had the Anglo-Saxons driven out or subdued the British Celts than they were fighting among themselves: Under the year 568 we find the following entry:

"Her Ceaulin and Cupa gefuhton wip
Aethelbryht. and hiene in Cent gefliemdon."[1]

Aethelbryht, in Modern English, Ethelbert was the king of Cent, and Ceaulin was the supposed leader of the Wessaxons. Of the identity of Ethelbert we are quite certain; of Ceaulin we are not so certain, but the usual reservations concerning the date being used, it can be said that less than a hundred and fifty years after the first settlement made in England by the Anglo-Saxons, the various tribes had begun fighting among themselves for supremacy in the island. Judging by the remaining entries in this section, practically every other one of which tells of a battle between the various tribes, it is apparent that this struggle went on with little abatement for about two hundred years. Then these people were far too busy fighting a much deadlier foe--the Danes--to quarrel among themselves.

It was in the sixth and seventh century that the various tribes began to settle down in groups and became distinguishable as separate kingdoms. Historians, in treating this period, have

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1. Earle, John, Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel, London, MacMillan & Company, 1865, p. 18

one can easily imagine the state of almost continual warfare that the island was plunged into, from which it never completely emerged for almost eight hundred years.

For hardly had the Anglo-Saxons driven out or subdued the British Celts than they were fighting among themselves; Under the year 568 we find the following entry:

"Her Ceaulin and Cups gefuhton wip

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always discussed the so-called "Heptarchy" the idea being that from the confusion that marked the invasions of the Anglo-Saxons there emerged in the sixth and seventh centuries seven more or less distinct kingdoms. Even in so excellent and authoritative a history as that of W. E. Lunt we find the following:[1]

> "The seven kingdoms which played important parts in the seventh century are known as the Heptarchy. The kingdom of Kent in the southeast was settled by the Jutes, forming the three kingdoms of Essex, Sussex, Wessex. North of the Saxons were the Angles, who organized the three kingdoms of East Anglia, Mercia, and Northumbria."1

Yet there is absolutely nothing in the chronicle to substantiate such an assumption. In fact, it is fairly safe to say after a perusal of the Chronicle, that such a setup as the "heptarchy" never existed in England.

Judging from the Chronicle, the political situation was far less settled than this. Of these so-called "kingdoms", only four receive definite mention in the Chronicle--Kent, Wessex, Mercia and Northumbria. These kingdoms also were probably not definitely bounded, but were of indeterminate and constantly changing area, a large portion of which probably depended on how many villages the leader could win over from one of the other kingdoms. This shifting would account for the many bloody battles between the various tribes.

Of the four kingdoms, which do figure in this part of the chronicle, the most outstanding is Wessex. This is of course

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1. Lunt, W. E., History of England, New York, Harper & Bros., 1928, p. 39

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natural since this Chronicle was produced at Winchester which was the capital of Wessex. The genealogy of the Wessaxon kings is repeated at intervals to keep it in the reader's mind. The deeds of the Wessaxon leaders are recorded faithfully from the year 495 when Cerdic and Cynric, the supposed founders of the Wessaxon State landed. With national pride the chroniclers recorded only victories. Says the Chronicle of one of the Wessaxon kings under the year 597 --

> "Her ongon Ceolwulf ricsian on
> Westseaxum and simle he feaht
> and won. oppe wip Angelcyn.
> oppe wip Walas oppe wib Peohtas.
> oppe with Scottas."[1]

If we took the chronicle too seriously anent the exploits of the Wessaxons and their leaders, we would believe they fought all the time, they fought everyone, and they always won. One indeed has to accept this with a very generous grain of salt.

The kingdom of Kent makes its initial entrance into the Chronicle in the inglorious manner related in the excerpt quoted above, when the defeat of the Kentish King at the hands of the Wessaxons is recorded. The kingdom of Kent was of enough importance to have the succession of its rulers rather faithfully recorded.

Northumbria enters into the chronicle at this point with considerable importance. Northumbria is recognized in the

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chronicle as a separate entity in the entry of the year 547:

"Her Ida feng to rice. þonon
norþan humbra cynecyn onwoc."[1]

The genealogy of Northumbria kings is given five times, which indicates that the writers of the chronicle recognized the importance which Northumbria attained during this era, although the military exploits of the Northumbrians are definitely not played up. It is reasonable to assume that the Wessaxons had more than one battle with the Northumbrians. The lack of any entry of such battles indicates that Wessaxons were not too successful in these encounters.

Mercia enters into the chronicle slowly and late. The first mention of Mercia comes in the year 655 in connection with the death of its king. The king, Penda, had been mentioned in previous years as a great war hero, but this is the first entry in which he is identified with Mercia. From here on Mercia looms more and more important. That by the year 655 Mercia was already challenging Northumbria's supremacy can be gathered from the accounts of Penda's victories over the Northumbians. In the next hundred years Mercia figures more and more frequently in the annals, Northumbria less and less frequently - evidence of Northumbria's decline. As in the case of Northumbria, the issue of Wessex' relationship with Mercia is neatly sidestepped. Only two encounters between the two countries are noted. The

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1. Earle, John, Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel, London, MacMillan & Company, 1865, p. 16

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1. Earle, John, Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel, London, Macmillan & Company, 1865, p. 18

The first is an account of a m eeting between Penda, leader of the Mercians, and two leaders of the Wessaxons:

> "628. Her Cynegils and Cuichelm ge-
> fuhton wip Pendan aet Cirenceaster.
> and gepingadan pa"[1]

Here the chronicle merely states that they fought and came to terms. The matter is not enlarged upon. The second entry is of a battle between Aescwine, king of the Wessaxons, and Wulfere, king of the Mercians:

> "674. Her Wulfere Pending and Aesc-
> wine gefuhton aet Biedanheafde. and
> py ilcan gear Wulfere forpferde"[2]

Here the question of who won is so neatly sidestepped that the reader is completely baffled. One can only guess that the record of the Wessaxons in this p eriod was none too good.

It is in this period of the Chronicle that we find the first account of the coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England. In the annal of the year 601 is recorded the landing of St. Augustine in England:

> "601. Her sende Gregorius papa Augustino
> aerce biscepe pallium in Bretene and wel
> monige godcunde lareowas him to fultome"[3]

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2. Ibid, p.36

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3. Ibid, p.20

The brevity of the entry is truly amazing. One would expect some detail and enlargement of an event that must have been of great importance to the authors; for after all, The Chronicle undoubtedly was composed by someone connected with the Church, yet here is the coming of Augustine recorded in little more than three lines. The brevity of the annal is more amazing in light of the fact that Bede was probably the source of this entry, also.[1] Bede's account of the landing of Augustine, his reception by King Ethelbert of Kent, and Ethelbert's conversion cover several pages; in the Chronicle, it is taken care of by one annal of about three lines, and the conversion of Ethelbert is gathered by inference only.

From this point on, the steady and uninterrupted growth of Christianity in Southern England can be gathered from the annals of the next fifty years: In 635, we find recorded the baptism of the king of the Wessaxons. Therefore, less than fifty years after the arrival of Augustine, Christianity had arrived in Southern England. The conversion of the king of Northumbria is recorded in the year 601 and that of the king of Mercia in 655.

However, of the other route through which Christianity reached England, the northern route from Ireland, the Chronicle has little to say. The coming of St. Columba is recorded at the year 565. The only mention of the great Aidan is the record of his death in the year 651. Otherwise, nothing is said of the act-

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1.See Bede, chapter xxv.

ivities of the Celtic church in England is said. The great synod at Whitby where the differences between the Celtic and Roman churches were settled in favor of the Roman church isn't even mentioned in the Chronicle. Again, it is strange that a Chronicle, housed in a cathedral and kept by churchmen, should be so deficient in the record of church events.

The next section of the Chronicle covers from the middle of the seventh century to approximately 855. It is in this section that we begin to get the first docum entary annals of this Chronicle. It is in this section that we find traces of the ancient chronicle in which the present Winchester Chronicle had its beginning- a chronicle that was probably started sometime in the seventh century and continued until the country of the Wessaxons was ravaged by the incursions of the Danes.

The reasons for believing this are several. In the first place, the cathedral of Winchester was built in 643, according to the Chronicle. Thus, this ancient chronicle could have been begun any time after this date. Secondly, something can be gathered from the content of the annals themselves,particularly in the earlier part of this section, the years 640 to 750. These entries are remarkably simple and sober, in contrast to many of the annals of the preceding section. For the first time in writing the present Chronicle, the compiler of Alfred's reign had an <u>adequate account</u> of the past, written in his own tongue, upon which he could rely. There is here none of the romancing in which the compiler indulged in the preceding section to compensate for the lack of written records,a lack that could not

be entirely from Bede. Gone are the frequent and elaborate genealogies which all too often cluttered the Chronicle. Starting with Birinus in 634, the accession of every new bishop of Winchester is faithfully recorded- further evidence of the documentary basis of this section of the Chronicle.

The style of this section of the Chronicle is peculiar. Whatever the contents of the preceding sections, the style was usually smooth and mature, indicating that these sections had been entirely written in Alfred's reign. The style of this section is different. Although the handwriting is the same as that of the preceding sections, certain crudities of expression and style occur, indicating that the writer of Alfred's reign was here working with and revising an older chronicle into the chronicle which he was writing. Indeed, so archaic is the expression of some of the passages that it is obvious that in many cases the compiler lifted whole passages from the older Winchester Chronicle into the new. As an example of this, there is the long entry under the year 755 telling of the battle between Cynewulf and Cyneheard. The sturdy roughness of this passage stamps it as being about the oldest bit of English prose that we have, dating between 755 and 790.

This is the section in which is recorded the rise of the Wessaxon kingdom. The first sixty years of this section of the chronicle covers the period when Mercia was in its ascendancy. There are many entries concerning the struggle between Mercia and Northumbria for supremacy, and a bloody struggle it was too.

Then along about the year 700 and onwards, the Wessaxons begin to figure more and more prominently in the military goings-on in the island. Not only are there accounts of their forays against the Welsh, but we find them wandering far afield in their encounters with the Mercians. The failure to note any outcome of these encounters indicates that the Wessaxons weren't always victorious, but they also indicate that the Wessaxons were strong enough to challenge the superiority of Mercia. Indeed, judging by the annal of 743, the Wessaxons were strong enough to fight as allies of the Mercians on an equal footing in that country's struggle against the Welsh.

Kent was obviously the first of the other more powerful kingdoms in England to succumb. As early as 689, we find accounts of the Wessaxon king, Ceadwalla, and his brother, Mul, harrying in Kent, and in 694, we find the Kentish people coming to terms with the Wessaxons. The greater countries to the north- Mercia and Northumbria- held out against the Wessaxons for over a century longer. This is in large part due to the fact that during the middle and the later part of the eigth century, the attention of the Wessaxon kings was diverted from conquest by internal disorders.

These disorders are first mentioned in the Chronicle in the year 750, when we find Cupred, the king of Wessex putting down an uprising led by one of his ealdormen, Aepehun. Then in 755, in another revolt, Sigebryht, Cupred's successor, was deprived of his kingdom by Cynewulf because of unjust deeds. Later, Cyne-

wulf was himself killed in an uprising led by Cyneheard, the brother of Sigebryht, which revolt is the subject of the famous annal of 755, although it really took place around 780.

These internal disorders weakened Wessex to a point where it was not able to pursue its course of aggrandizemant until after the beginning of the nimth century. Then in 823, there is recorded a great victory by Egbert, king of the Wessaxons, over the Mercians, and in the same year, some of the smaller tribes, the South Saxons, the East Saxons, and the East Anglians,who hitherto had been subjugated by the Mercians, applied to Egbert for protection. Then in the year 827 comes the following:

> "And py ilcan geare ge eade Ecgbryht cyning Miercna rice and al paet be supan Humbre waes. and he waes se eahtepa cyning sepe Bretwalda waes.....And se Ecgbryht laedde fierd to Dore wip Norpanhymbre. and hie him paer eapmedo budon and gepuaernesse. and hie on pam tohwurfan"[1]

Thus with this simle almost laconic entry, typical of the chronicler when sometimes dealing with a great event, we l earn that at last Wessex was supreme in England, under command of Egbert, the first of the great Wessex kings.

But it wasnot a rosy and unblemished future that the Wessaxon kings had to look to. For as the most powerful kings in England, they were plunged into wars with a devastating foe that

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1.Earle, John: Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel; London, MacMillan & Company,1865; p. 64

[1] Earle, John: Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel; London, Macmillan & Company, 1865; p. 64

gave their country no rest for over a century. For in 787 came the first attack by the Danes. Again the entry is simle and undetailed: ".....And on his dagum cuomon aerest iii scipu.....paet waeron pa aerastan scipu Deniscra mona pe Angelcynnes lond gesohton"[1]

Thus in simple terms was recorded the beginning of one of the greatest curses that the English people had to endure since they became a nation. Their history had been bloody before; it was bloody a hundred-fold now. The Danes gradually overran nearly all England, ravaging, pillaging, and killing as they went, until all that stood between them and complete subjugation of the island was Wessex; and Wessex was, herself, hard pressed for a long time for survival. Yet none of this could be gathered from the brief, calm account of their first coming in the Chronicle. Possibly the chronicler, who had undoubtedly lived through the worst years of the invasions, felt that whoever read the Chronicle would know the significance of this entry without its being enlarged upon.

The next hundred years of the Chronicle(855-955) cover the glorious years of the House of Wessex and deal almost exclusively with the struggle of the Wessaxon kings against the Danes. It is in this section of the Chronicle that it attains a peak both from the point of view of literature and history that was attained by none of the other chronicles and that was reached no-

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1. Earle, John: Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel; London, MacMillan & Company,1865;p. 56

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1. Earle, John: Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel; London, Macmillan & Company, 1865; p. 58

where else in this Chronicle.

The year 855 is a natural dividing point in the annals, for it was in this year that the Danes made their first permanent settlement in England: "855. Her haepne men aerest on Sceapige over wint saetum."[1] This was in the reign of Aepelwulf over whom the chronicler waxed so enthusiastis that he traced his genealogy right back to Adam.[2] Aepelwulf was undoubtedly the greatest of the Wessaxon kings before Alfred, Whose father he was. He won many battles against the Welsh, who, taking advantage of the preoccupation of the English with the Danes, were threatening to overrun the Mercian kingdom. He was the only king before Alfred who scored a decisive victory over the Danes in the year 853.

Yet in spite of his best efforts, we can see the inexorable tide of the Danes sweeping on. Kent fell to them in the year 865, Northumbria in 867, and Mercia in 868. Wessex itself was threatened when Alfred, the third son of Aepelwulf, came to the throne in 871. With the entry of Alfred into the Chronicle there is a sudden change in the annals. For almost the first time they lose their calm and almost impersonal tone. The annals become vibrant with life and vitality. For the first time the reader is aware of the human hand that penned these annals. One reason for this undoubtedly is that the chronicler is writing about practically contemporary events, events which he didn't have to delve out of

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1.Earle,John: Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel; London, MacMillan & Company, 1865; p.70

2.Ibid, p.68

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1. Earle, John: Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel; London, MacMillan & Company, 1865; p.70

2. Ibid, p.68

a half-forgotten past or copy from another book, but events which he himself had witnessed. Another reason for this vitality can be traced to the fact that these men recognized Alfred for the great l eader that he was. One can sense the enthusiasm and admiration that they expressed for him in the glowing account of his exploits against the Danes. Especially is this true of the second writer who took part in the composition of the Chronicle. The original handwriting stops at the year 891. The next hand completes this annal and goes on to the year 893. The annals from the year 893 through the year 897 mark the high water point of the Winchester Chronicle. They were undoubtedly written in glorification of Alfred and record faithfully the details of his campaigns against the Danes. For sheer vigor of style, intensity of feeling, and dramatic expression there is nothing like it in all Anglo-Saxon prose.

The result is that Alfred is the only one of these Anglo-Saxons who stands out as a person, a human being in the Chronicle- his staying power, his ability to'take it'his ability as a military strategist, the keenesswhich enabled him to pick up tricks from the enemy and beat them at there own game. Well might these Anglo-Saxons have said of him:" Paet waes god Cyning". Unfortunately, the Chronicle makes no mention of his contribution to peacetime pursuits, particularly his efforts to revive and improve the learning which had just about died out in England.

Even in these glowing accounts the sense of the historical is missing. The very important treaty of Wedmore in878 is barely mentioned, and then one would scarcely guess it was a treaty. The

account runs thus:

> "....And paes ymb iii wiecan com se cyning to him Godrum....and his se cyning paer onfeng aet fulwihte, and his crim lising was at Wepmor. and he was xii niht mid pam cyninge and he hine miclum and his ge feran mid feo weorpude."[1]

In the case of this very important treaty, one has to consult Asser's Life of Alfred to discover the why and the wherefore. One interesting point concerning the treaty of Wedmore is that contrary to most people's belief, Alfred's troubles with the Danes didn't stop there. The treaty does mark the end of the last serious threat to the independence of Wessex itself, but more Danes from the continent kept trying it for many years. It is with these subsequent battles with the Danes that the great prose passages of the annals 893-897 deal.

After the death of Alfred, the Chronicle settles down to a well written narrative, differing only from the preceding entries in its lack of intensity. This is the case up to the year 925, and covers approximately the reign of Edward, the son of Alfred. Here we can see how Edward set about reconquering the Danelaw. He had plenty of excuses upon which to base his conquests, for the Danes were constantly inciting the Mercians or the Northumbrians to revolt. Here again one finds good writing, but it represents a distinct let down from the almost exalted prose of the

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1. Earle, John, Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel, London, MacMillan & Company, 1865, p. 80

preceding annals.

The last annals of this section, those which cover the reign of the last of the great Anglo-Saxon kings, Aepelstan and Edgar I, are peculiar because of their meagreness. They resemble the type of annal which hadn't been written in the Chronicle since the year 822. These years are the years when Alfred's descendants finished reconquering the Danelaw, yet the facts of history are barely mentioned. The lack of data is compensated by four poems which are inserted into the Chronicle at this point. Of these four, two deserve special mention. One, The Death of Edgar, is interesting because it was so obviously written for the place it occupies in the Chronicle. Distinguished by little artistic value, it is interesting in that it is little more than an annal in poetic form. The other, The Battle of Brumanburgh, is not only the finest poem in the Chronicle, but one of the finest poems in Anglo-Saxon literature.

The annals of the last section which cover the years from approximately 960 to 1070 are negligible. As far as history or literature are concerned, the Chronicle may well have stopped with the death of Edgar in 975. With the death of the last great Wessaxon king, came the death of the Chronicle as a great national document. The entries became so scattered that it is difficult to spin a thread of chronology between them. It records only two events of national importance - the coming of Canute in 1017, and the coming of William the Conqueror in 1066. Between the years 1005 and 1070, there are only eleven entries, and these deal mainly with local affairs of Canterbury itself,

where by this time the Chronicle had been transferred.

That the language too was suffering can be gathered from the annal of the year 1070, the last entry of the Chronicle. We can see that the language is deteriorating and that certain corruptions are setting in. Case endings are not so prominent and the se, seo, paet declension is beginning to disappear. Appearing is the abbreviated þ which took its place.

There is something sad about this last section of the Chronicle. In its deterioration, it reflects the deterioration of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom. It reached its height in the annals covering the great years of the kingdom of Wessex. Its last annal, the year 1070, is four years after the Norman William won the battle of Hastings.

In a way it is fitting that the Winchester Chronicle should close with the end of the Wessaxon dynasty with which it had been so intimately connected.

CHAPTER III

The Chronicle and the People

When one encounters a document such as the Winchester Chronicle, one's interest in it isn't confined to history alone. In dealing with a document produced by a people as obscure to the average student as the Anglo-Saxons, one of the first questions likely to be asked about it is "Does this document tell anything about the people, what they were like, how they were governed?" The answer in the case of the Winchester Chronicle is in the affirmative, but in an affirmative that must be qualified.

As I have said before, the writers of the Chronicle were not historians as we think of them. Their job was merely to tell of events. They did not think it important or necessary to give a picture of the social structure behind the events to render them more intelligible. Therefore, any attempt to draw a picture of the Anglo-Saxons and how they lived has to be pieced together and drawn by interence from the generally calm and objective annals of the Chronicle. This, it is possible to do to a certain extent, as can be seen from the following paragraphs:

As to the political setup, it is difficult to draw a complete picture, but certain points of it are fairly clear, enough to refute certain popular and erroneous notions that have grown up. In the political unit of the Anglo-Saxons, it is evident enough that the king was the most important person as far as government was concerned. This is obvious from the important part which they play in the Chronicle. Practically

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the whole history of the Anglo-Saxons is recorded through the life, death, and exploits of the leaders of the various kingdoms. Also the kingship was determined by hereditary succession and not by election as was often the case of the Germanic tribes on the continent. This is obvious from the many genealogies which are scattered throughout the Chronicle, a genealogy even serving as an introduction to the Chronicle as a whole. Just how centralized was the authority of the king cannot be determined, although it is quite obvious that the trend of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom was towards centralization. The earlier Anglo-Saxon kings such as Edwin and Oswasld of Northumbria were never kings of a unified England. They extended their influence over the other regions of England and may have forced the kings of the other regions to recognize that influence, but these earlier men could never seem to incorporate the conquered regions into their own dominions. These men were never called 'king of all England' as were Alfred and his successors. Instead, they were given the title of 'Bretwalda' by the writers of the Chronicle,[1] a term much more modest in its implications. By the end of Alfred's reign, the process of centralization had progressed to such an extent under the House of Wessex that the Chronicle says of Alfred in recording his death: "Se waes cyning ofer eall Ongel cyn butan pam daele pe under Dena on walde waes"[2] and forty-two years later, in speaking of Edmund, the grandson of Alfred, this is emphasized more clearly in the

1. Earle, John: Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel, London, MacMillan & Company, 1865, p.62
2. Ibid, p.96

simple and more definite terms used in regard to him in a poem entered in the year 942: "Eadmund cyning "Engla peoden".[1] By this time it is obvious that the Wessaxon kings had attained some form of centralized power.

The other important governing agency of the Anglo-Saxons was the Witan. The Witan, as far as can be gathered was a sort of advisory council to the king, the chief members being the ealdormen, or earl, representative of the shire. Some people have mistakenly looked upon the Witan as indicative of democratic forces in the society of the Anglo+Saxons. Such was not the case. The Witan, as far as its membership was concerned, was aristocratic. Also, and what is more to the point in the present discussion of the Chronicle, there is some doubt as to how much authority and prestige the Witan actually possessed. As in the case of almost any advisory body, its power probably was a relative thing, depending upon the weakness or strength of the ruler. Possibly in theory the Witan possessed considerable power; in actual practice, if the Chronicle is any criterion, the reverse was nearer the truth. In all of the Winchester Chronicle, the Witon is mentioned exactly three times, in the years 755, 868, and 911. Certainly if the body were as important in reality as it was in theory, it would have deserved more mention than this.

As to the nobility, some knowledge can be picked up here

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1. Earle, John, Two of the Saxon Chronicles, Parallel, London, MacMillan & Company, 1865, p. 116

and there. The most important figures in the kingdom next to the king, were the royal representatives in the shire. These were the ealdormen or earls as they were later called. That these ealdormen were men of considerable importance in the kingdom can be gathered from the frequent mention of them in the Chronicle. Some of them were strong enough to lead revolts that challenged the authority of the kings themselves, as is the case in the entry of the year 750:

> "Her Cupred cyning gefeaht uuip Aepelhun
> pone ofermedan aldorman"[1]

More often, however, they have their exploits recorded when fighting along side of the king. Often, the ealdormen, as the kings representative fought against the Danes, as is recorded in the year 851:

> "Her Ceorl aldorman gefeaht wip
> haepene men mid Defena scire aet
> Wiegan beorge.....And py ilean
> geare Aepelstan cyning and Ealchere
> dux micelne here ofslogon aet
> sondwic.....[2]

(Here the Chronicler substitutes the Latin 'dux' for the Anglo-Saxon 'ealdorman' as sometimes happens.) In spite of the fact that there are several revolts led by the ealdormen recorded in the Chronicle, there is no evidence there to substantiate the

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1. Earle, John, Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel, London, MacMillan & Company, 1865, p. 48

2. Ibid, p. 66

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1. Earle, John, Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel, London, MacMillan & Company, 1865, p. 48

2. Ibid, p. 56

theory that they represented a force among the Anglo-Saxons akin to the feudalism of the continent. Feudalism was something that came into England as a result of the Norman conquest.

Beyond these three or four points, little can be derived from the Chronicle as to the political makeup of Anglo-Saxon England. It does, however, serve more effectively to shed some light on the people themselves, their character and their way of thinking.

Some of the characteristics are self-evident. For instance, it is obvious that they were a warlike people, war was their primary concern. The Winchester Chronicle is but a bloody record of one battle after another, one war after another: The Anglo-Saxons vs. the Celts, the Anglo-Saxons vs. Sven and Canute, and finally the Anglo-Saxons vs. the Normans. In the last three cases, the Anglo-Saxons were the objects of the attacks; in the other two cases they brought it upon themselves. But whether they were the attacker or the attacked, never let it be said that the Anglo-Saxons ever tried to avoid a fight. They never stopped for argument. There is no record whatsoever in the Chronicle of the Anglo-Saxons trying to settle an argument by peaceful means. Their motto might almost have been - "Fight first and talk afterwards." Their attitude toward war was certainly not that of a twentieth century pacifist or conscientious objector. The writers of the Chronicle never said they liked fighting in so many words, but on the other hand, never did they say they disliked it. When the number killed in a certain battle is entered it is done so without

comment. War and death in battle were common phenomena to these people, a part of their lives. When the Chronicler is dealing with Alfred's wars against the Danes, his intense pride in the glorious showing of the Wessaxons and their king lent a charm to his pen that resulted in some of the most gifted passages of Anglo-Saxon prose that can be found. And one of the most noble of poems in the Anglo-Saxon vernacular is a battle poem inserted into the Chronicle celebrating a victory of King Aepelstan over the Danes.[1]

Hand in hand with this warlike quality went a sturdiness of character that could almost be called hard-bitten toughness. They had to be that way. These people led a hard life and had to be hard to endure it. They were not nice people in any genteel meaning of the word. They received no quarter and gave none. Among the various fates that might be inflicted on a captive was beheading, as in the year 792 when the beheading of the leader of the East Anglians by the Northumbrian king is recorded. Burning was common. In the year 657 we find Mul, brother of the Wessaxon king, being burned by the Kentish. Maiming was also practiced, as in the case of the fate of Prem, the Kentish king, in the hands of the Mercians in the year 796. Political assassination was very common, and from the many entries concerning them, it can be gathered that the Northumbrians were past masters at the art.

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1. The Battle of Brunnanburgh

Unpleasant are these details in themselves, but they are indicative of the durability and staying power of the Anglo-Saxon character, qualities that enabled them to endure the centuries of havoc wrecked by the Danes and enabled them to produce a leader such as Alfred. These are the qualities that enabled them to outlast their conquerers and ultimately to absorb them.

From a reading of the Chronicle, one can gather that when the Anglo-Saxons became Christians, they did so with as much vitality as they did everything else. St. Augustine landed in England in 601 and with the christianization of Mercia in 655, England was completely christianized, although the differences between the Roman and Celtic churches were not ironed out until some years later.

The christianity of the Anglo-Saxons was definitely a militant christianity. One of the chief points of the terms forced upon a foe, if he were heathen, was the acceptance of Christianity. Indeed so important was this point to the monks, who recorded the Chronicle, that this is often the only part of peace terms that is mentioned. Such is the case concerning the treaty of Wedmore between Alfred and the Danes entered in the year 878, of which the only part told about in the Chronicle is the Baptism of Godrum, the Danish leader. The Anglo-Saxon Bishops and Priests were more often than not fighting men. Instead of being automatically exempt from fighting as is the case today, very often they were right in the thick of things, as can be seen in entries such as these:

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The christianity of the Anglo-Saxons was decidedly a militant christianity. One of the chief points of the terms forced upon a Dane, if he were beaten, was the acceptance of Christianity. Indeed so important was this point to the monks, who recorded the Chronicle, that this is often the only part of peace terms that is mentioned. Such is the case concerning the treaty of Wedmore between Alfred and the Danes entered in the year 878, of which the only part told about in the Chronicle is the Baptism of Guthrum, the Danish leader. The Anglo-Saxon Bishops and Priests were more often than not fighting men. Instead of being automatically exempt from fighting as is the case today, very often they were right in the thick of things, as can be seen in entries such as these:

"Da sende he Aepulf his sunu of paere fierde and Ealstan his bisc and Wulfheard his Aldormon to Cent micle werede and hie Baldred pone cyning norp ofer Temese adrifon."[1]

"845. Her Eanulf aldorman gefeaht mid Sumur Saetum and Ealchstan bisc and Osric aldorman....wip Deniscne here and paer micel wael geslogon and sige namon."[2]

The Anglo-Saxon men of God were obviously little different from the rest of their country men.

One phase of Anglo-Saxon christianity is the way in which they mixed Christianity with a few of their heathen habits which they never could quite get rid of. One interesting example of this is found over and over again in the Chronicle. It occurs in the genealogies. In tracing the genealogies of the kings, the Chronicler always traced them back to Woden, the old Norse god - the king of Godsand men. It almost seems to be the old Norse method of establishing the divine right of kings. The first section of the Chronicle - the introductory genealogy - traces the lives of the Wessaxon kings from Alfred right back to Woden. This is the general course of the genealogies in the main body of the Chronicle, be they of Wessaxon, Northumbrian or Mercian kings. There is, however, one interest-

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1. Earle, John, Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel, London, MacMillan & Company, 1865, p. 62

2. Ibid, p. 66

ing exception, and this is the genealogy given of Aepelwulf in the year 855. This genealogy outstrips all others. Here the line is carried to Woden and then beyond Woden to Geat, which is quite transcendental. Finally the genealogy bridges the gap between the mythological and the scriptural, getting up to and beyond Noah, past the early Hebrew prophets to "Adam primus homo et pater noster. est xps Amen."[1] No grander send-off than this could have been given to the House of Wessex!

In conclusion one might say that the Anglo-Saxons were not an introspective or a philosophical people, judging from the Chronicle. They never stopped to consider the why and wherefore of the universe or of their own existence. They were not a questioning or doubting people. When calamaties and misfortunes visited them, they seem to have accepted them as a matter of course. This may be due in part to a certain fatalism bred into their characters as a result of their early heathen belief in the Wyrd. Watever caused it, however, this lack of introspection accounts in part for the calm objectivity of the annals in the Chronicle. The bloodiest deeds are recorded without comment. The hardest misfortunes without complaints.

This objectivity is found to such a degree in the Chronicle that the Anglo-Saxons didn't place any supernatural explanation on natural phenomena, didn't try to interpret them as signs and omens of the Almighty or as being the agent of any disasters.

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1. Earle, John, Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel, London, MacMillan & Company, 1865, p. 70

Like so many other events, the Chronicle records natural phenomena without comment, in such entries as these:

> "538. Her sunne apiestrode xiii dagum aet Kl' Mart from aermergenne op. undern"[1]
>
> "729. Her cometa se steorra hiene opiewde and Scs: Ecgbryht forpferde."[2]

The second quotation in particular is illustrative of my point. Under the year 729, two evens are recorded, a comet and a death, but no connection is made between them. The comet is not interpreted as an omen of the death. In this regard the Anglo-Saxons form a singular exception among primitive people.

Thus the picture of the Anglo-Saxons that can be drawn from the Chronicle is a broad one. They were not a thinking or a talking people; they were a doing people. They were not a people who questioned their existence or complained of its vicissitudes. They didn't stop to wonder about their hardships, but fought against them incessantly. War and calamity to them were as natural as life and death. They were a people who lived strenuously and died hard. A people with a seemingly infinite ability to 'take it'.

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1. Earle, John, Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel, London, MacMillan & Company, 1865, p. 16

2. Ibid, p. 46

CONCLUSION

In looking back over the Chronicle, I find that on the whole it is extremely reliable historically. In only one section is there great need for reading the Chronicle with caution, as has been noted. Otherwise, it presents a reliable chronology of events that are of great value to the present day historian.

From a social standpoint it presents a broad picture, not a detailed picture. This picture is valuable as far as it goes, but does not go as far as one would wish it. For a more detailed picture one must go elsewhere.

This is a document whose value has been underestimated for centuries. It deserves more than the brief treatment it receives in the usual history of English literature. It is a document that deserves being known to students both of English History and English Literature.

Abstract

The Winchester Chronicle is one of seven major recensions which, when considered as a whole, are designated by the title of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. Of these seven, the Winchester Chronicle has all the indications of being the earliest in point of composition. The exact date of its composition is unknown, but it is usually assigned to the reign of Alfred the Great. The entries up to the year 891 are all in the same handwriting; after 891, a number of hands took part in its composition. The conclusion usually made is that the chronicle in its present form was begun in the reign of Alfred. Up to the year 891, the writing consisted in revising an earlier, lost chronicle while after 891, the entries are of more or less contemporary events.

There are some who have used linguistic arguments in behalf of a theory of Mercian origin for the Winchester Chronicle. However, these arguments are nullified by virtue of the fact that linguistic peculiarities can be used to argue the opposite side of the question just as effectively.

As to whether or not Alfred himself played any direct part in the composition of the Chronicle , it is a question. Certainly there is no reason why such should not have been the case. Some evidence on this point can be derived from the twelfth century chronicle of Geffrei Gaimar.

As an historical document, the Winchester Chronicle is

unique. As a vernacular history, it antedates all other English chronicles by at least a century, and it has no continental counterpart for over two centuries.

The manuscript as it now exists covers the years 1 to 1070. Up to 755, the entries are for the most part short. From 755 to about 925 the entries are frequent and full. From 925 to the end of the Chronicle, the entries again become sporadic and incomplete, space being taken up by four poems inserted into it. Some interpolations were made on erasures of the original text by a twelfth century writer, but these interpolations are clearly distinguishable from the original matter.

The Chronicle begins with a genealogy of the West Saxon kings from Cerdic, the supposed founder of the West Saxon kingdom to Alfred. The first section of the Chronicle, the years 1 to 449 is the least interesting part of the Chronicle. The entries deal largely with church and Roman Empire history, being mainly a restatement of material found in Bede's Ecclesiastical History of England.

The annals from 449 to about the middle of the seventh century are the most difficult part of the Chronicle to read and evaluate. Lacking ducumentary material, the chroniclers resorted to legend and the oral tradition. In this section are recorded the first landing of the Angles and Saxons, the development of the various kingdoms, and the coming of Christianity. Very little mention is given to the Celtic church, and no mention is given to the important synod at Whitby. The reliable

information in this section is in generalities, specific details, names and dates cannot be trusted.

In the next section of the Chronicle, from the middle of the seventh century to 855, we find the first documentary annals of the Chronicle. The entries are simple and sober in contrast to the romancing of the preceding section, and the accessions of the Bishops of Winchester are faithfully recorded . Archaisms in the style indicate that the writer was here working with an older manuscript.

In this section is recorded the rise of the West Saxon state. Kent succumbed as early as 694, Mercia in 823, and Northumbria in 827. In 787 comes the first record of the Danish Invasions.

The next hundred years of the Chronicle cover the glorious years of the house of Wessex. This section deals almost exclusively with the struggle of the West Saxon kings against the Danes, the climax coming with the reign of Alfred. This section attains a peak from the point of view both of literature and history that was reached by none of the other chronicles. This is particularly true of the annals 893 to 898 which record Alfred's great victories over the Danes. The exalted and vibrant prose of these entries is like nothing else that was ever written in Anglo-Saxon prose.

After the death of Alfred the Chronicle settles down to a calm, well written narrative. Towards the end of this section the annals again become meagre, but the lack of data is com-

pensated by four poems inserted into the Chronicle, among them the Battle of Brunnanburgh, one of the finest battle poems in Anglo- Saxon.

The annals of the last section(960-1070) are negligible. Only two events of importance are recorded-the coming of Canute in 1017 and the coming of William the Conqueror in 1066. The language by this time was in an obvious state of decay. As far as history or literature are concerned, the Chronicle may well have stopped with the death of Edgar, the last of the great Anglo-Saxon kings.

The picture of the political setup of the Anglo-Saxons as seen in the Chronicle is far from complete, but certain points of it are fairly clear. It is obvious that the king was all importantand that the trend of the authority of the king was towards centralization. On the other hand, the Witan was relatively unimportant, more so than modern historians seem to think. Among the nobility, the most important figures were the ealdormen or earls, the royal representatives in the shires. These earls were often powerful enough to lead revolts against the king, but there is no evidence in the Chronicle that substantiates the theory that that they represented a force akin to the feudalism of the Continent.

From the Chronicle it can be gathered that the Anglo-Saxons were a hard-living, hard-dying people. They were warlike, sturdy,at times cruel. They were not a thinking or talking people, but an acting people.

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